

*A Child Will Lead Us*  
*Mark 9:30-37*  
*19 September 2021*  
*Sermon preached by Rev. Jessica McCrae*

About 25 years ago when I was studying at theological school preparing for ordination I took a pastoral care practicum, learning how to sit with people and talk with people who were dealing with those huge issues that have a tendency to invade our lives. One of my classmates, I'll call him Kevin, thought he knew everything. He was one of those people full of his own importance, who thought he had all the answers, who loved the sound of his own voice. He would have been right at home, jumping into the fray with Jesus' friends, to position himself as the greatest among them.

But then, about midway through the semester my classmate Kevin learned that his uncle had been killed in a car crash in Toronto. Since he was studying not far from his aunt's home he was asked by his relatives to go to her and "minister" to her. They likely meant for him to be a caring, loving presence, but Kevin, well I think he truly did believe that he would show up and make this horrible situation ok for his aunt. He'd make sense of it all. He was on a mission. He got on

the subway full of ideas, scripture passages, prayers and words of proverbial wisdom that he had learned from some book or course.

As he later told the story, when Kevin arrived at the house there were a few people gathered. His aunt was numb with grief and shock and their son, Joey, was nowhere to be seen. Joey was about 10 years old, on the autism spectrum with very limited verbal skills. Everyone assumed he couldn't really process what happened to his father as his mother tried to explain it to him. After she told him he just got up and went into his bedroom all by himself and shut the door.

All the words that Kevin had prepared, the way he envisioned this all going, faded. He was at a total loss in the face of such grief.

And then Joey came slowly down the hall in his flannel hockey pajamas, feet in bright red socks. He looked at Kevin, and then he walked over to his mother, gave her a quick awkward hug (utterly unexpected) and placed a sheet of paper in her lap. He understood more than anyone realized. He couldn't put it into words but he needed to comfort his mother, some way. In his room he had taken out a few crayons and a sheet of paper and drawn a simple picture. In it were three things: a car, a rainbow and a cross. And then off he

went, back to his room. Seems he'd learned more from sitting with his parents in church than anyone had ever realized.

Amazingly, Kevin had the good sense not to try to wax theological about what had happened. There was nothing more to be said. With his gesture, and that deep profound wisdom lurking within that simple drawing, Joey reminded them that hope is always possible. It may not look the way we expect, or come the way we expect. But it comes. Joey taught that lesson as well, or frankly, better, than any of us could have.

By now I think we are all pretty familiar with the high priority that Jesus gives children in his ministry. But his message today isn't just about children, it is about being aware of the wisdom in the world all around us – in places where power doesn't tend to lurk - in creation, in children, in the oppressed and the marginalized, in dark corners and desperate situations, God is working through all of it – wisdom, direction, challenge and hope, all coming to us in unexpected ways, through unexpected voices.

The disciples learned all about wisdom in unexpected places that day; in many ways it had to be the lowest point in the disciples' relationship with Jesus, all that arguing about who was greater, who

had more power. It was exactly what the disciples needed, to have the wind knocked out of them a bit when Jesus took that child, placed her in front of them and said, this is who you must welcome. This is the way to the kingdom of God. The last will be first.

And too often we miss the point of Jesus' teaching, or forget it altogether. In the face of big discussions, big challenges, we always seem to get sidelined by power – who has it and who can grab it. Whose ideas are the greatest, what it will get us, how it will make us look good. Like the disciples, we tend to miss the point completely making it too much about us, and too little about others. Looking in the wrong places for wisdom. But Jesus is a great teacher – and sometimes our lectionary has impeccable timing, so instead of reprimanding the disciples, and us, he begins the discussion where we are, fixated on the idea of greatness, defined in human terms, and he teaches us all an important lesson about God, about greatness in God's terms.

The disciples were making the same mistakes we usually make, determining success and failure, winning and losing, greatness and weakness in human terms of money, strength and power, in terms of our own control, in terms of what we can do as opposed to

what God can do through us. Just as the Messiah is no longer defined by political power and military strength but by humbling himself as a child in a manger and speaking truth even if it means giving himself over to death, so too is greatness defined as reaching out with humbleness and humility, speaking truths that are difficult to hear, welcoming others and what they have to teach us, and being open to what *God* can do in us.

Picking up on last week, when we hear greatness defined in these terms, in terms of humility, and openness and welcome, we begin to get an idea of what setting our minds on God, living as a disciple of Jesus, really implies. Being a faithful Christian is not about how often we sit in these pews, how much money we give, how well we quote scripture. Being a faithful Christian, rising to a call of discipleship means humbling ourselves as Christ humbled himself, for others. Not responding to the world and others as a way to fill our needs or elevate ourselves, but responding to the world because we are open to Christ working through us, because the *world* needs it. It is about taking ourselves less seriously and Jesus' mission of love and justice more seriously. It is about knowing that we don't have all the answers but being excited to learn what they are from whoever is

sent into our life to point the way, even if they are nothing at all like us.

Who *is* the greatest among us? Who has the most to teach us? Jesus tells us it may not be who we think, Jesus tells us that chances are we have to shake up our preconceived notions of how the world works and open ourselves to a new way of relating to each other

So much as happened in and to our world in the last two years. How will we go forward? As God's people, let us be agents of grace and agents of change in an unfair world. Let us continue working, long after this pandemic settles, to see beyond ourselves and our own needs and wants to see the face of Christ in those we are tempted to shut out. Let us work together to undo the powers of greed that surround us and usher in God's reign of peace and justice. Let us commit to the journey ahead, a journey that leads to new life ... if we are willing to follow, a little child will lead us. Thanks be to God.